

Snow Angel

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And then there's nothing left to run from but time. Against all odds they had escaped their fate, but at what cost? Maria was dying, and not even the solace of Earth could fix that.

Status: complete

Published: 2016-04-25

Words: 17314

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Friendship/Tragedy -
Characters: Shadow, Maria R. - Reviews: 12 - Favs: 41 - Follows: 11

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11913567/1/Snow-Angel>

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A/N:

This story is part of the Echoes of Eternity series, but you don't need to read it to understand this. It's just a "What if Maria survived?" scenario that has a few elements from my series. To explain a few things: Rei is an old friend of Maria's, and she and Shadow were separated five years before what happened on the ARK. That's all you need to know.

This story's inspiration was Overgrowth by SociopathicArchangel. They're about different things and from different fandoms, but the general mood and the short slices of life scenes were inspired by that story. And "Sometimes, kindness is enough" is a quote from there.

Echoes of Eternity: Offshoot

Drifting, flying through the expanse of space, a young girl dreams. She is lost in the vastness of that universe, wandering aimless through a world that rejected her, cut her life short. Through stars and snow she is carried, searching, dreaming of a future she can never have. A future that will never be.

Life, a happy dream, tempts her, and her spirit draws closer. Curious. She had always been one to wonder what if, what could be, what could have been. And stuck in this darkness, so far away from the light of the living... For just a moment... She catches a glimpse of another world.

The darkness breaks, parts aside to make way for blinding light. Feeling shoots through her numb spirit's body, and her lungs open as she takes a breath of sweet, cool air. Absently she clenches her hand into a fist, clinging to life.

Barely conscious, clutching at scraps, but alive again.

"Maria?"

Shadow? That voice... How familiar. She recalls that it used to mean safety, warmth, happiness. *Shadow.* But now... Now, that voice scares her. She remembers it screaming.

"Come on, wake up. We have to go."

Memories seep into her. The end is long gone, and she's been left to wander. *I can't. Shadow... I'm so sorry. I can't. I can't wake up anymore.*

"... Maria?"

It's... It's too late, Shadow. I...

Maria bolted up, eyes wide, gasping for air as if it was being sucked out of her. Startled, Shadow jumped back from where she lay on the bench. "Maria?!"

The girl shrank down, quaking hands gripping her shoulders tightly. Before her blind eyes lay death's door, looming menacingly over her, threatening to tear her spirit from her body. There, in the back of her mind, was the terrible memory of blood, deafening shots resounding around her, pain ripping through her body, and the sudden relief as she finally went numb.

What... Maria shuddered, feeling suddenly very cold. "Something is wrong," she whispered.

Shadow stepped closer, a layer of concern on his face. "What is it?"

The girl turned slowly to look at him. Shadow... He was injured, a blood-stained bandage wrapped around his arm. *That's right, I remember,* she thought. *The soldier.* But even now, fully aware of herself, Maria still couldn't shake the feeling that something was terribly wrong.

Maria stood shakily, barely managing to catch herself from stumbling back onto the bench. "W-we need to go. Now."

Shadow blinked and crossed his arms. Why was she acting so strange? "What's the matter?"

"I just..." Maria turned to look out the window behind her. In the medical bay, only one great window stretched across the wall. It looked down on the shimmering blue planet below, casting light into the room's darkened crannies. "I'm just ready to leave this place behind."

Determination filled her. That's it; that was all. She didn't want to waste anymore time on a ship teeming with nightmares. Maria, sick as she was, was running out of time. And she wanted to spend as much of her future as possible on Earth.

Nothing was wrong. Nothing was wrong.

Though it was still shaking, she offered her hand and smiled widely. "Let's run, so we can get to Earth as fast as possible!"

Though he remained skeptical, Shadow was reassured by her change in tone and returned with a small smirk of his own. "I bet you can't keep up," he teased, taking her hand.

"We'll see!" Maria laughed and took off, doing her best to leave her fears behind in that room. She was going to a place where she'd finally be free.

And the two ran, ran from the past, ran from the horrible future that fate had, in another world, forced upon them. And death closed its doors on Maria as the duo of friends managed to escape it. For now.

Gerald felt... uneasy. That was what best described the anxiety blooming inside him. The last he'd seen of Maria and Shadow, they

had been facing off against a small group of soldiers. And then the camera had changed, leaving him to wonder.

While he knew that Shadow was more than equipped to deal with a couple of lackeys, something about the weary look they both had, about Maria's frazzled hair and bloodstained blue skirt, was getting to him.

They were exhausted of course, having been on the run for days. They couldn't have slept easy knowing that G.U.N. was on their tails. So the two would be struggling by this point.

And yet, if Shadow was dead and Maria had been captured, the Commander would certainly have been told. His radio had sat silent for hours, and the old professor had refused to let himself sleep. So, surely, they were safe. For at least a little while.

The Commander stared with his eyes narrowed at the camera screens, watching, waiting like a creature about the pounce. His gaze only shifted when the radio crackled to life. "Commander?! Commander, sir!"

"Yes, yes, what is it?" the old man asked, smoothing back his greying brown hair.

"We've spotted the escapees in hall 3-C! However... Sir, they're running straight towards the hangar."

The Commander slammed his fist on the table. "Well, what are you waiting for?! Catch them before they launch a bloody escape pod, you idiots! And what the hell are the security techs doing?! Why isn't this ship on lockdown?!" Frantically, he flicked through cameras until he found the duo.

Gerald couldn't help the smile and the tears that pricked his eyes as he spotted them. Maria looked nothing like the broken, terrified girl he had seen yesterday. She was beaming with all her might as she

ran, laughing until she was out of breath, disheveled golden hair catching in the light.

He was reminded then of that girl he had known so very long ago, before sickness took root in her body. Too much energy for the old man, running around and knocking things over in his lab. Her laughter had always cheered him up as he did his grim work: trying to save her life. That little girl he had forgotten.

But he remembered now. He remembered that his granddaughter was not destined to live caged within these walls. He remembered her longing to break away from the chains of this life, her terrible sickness. And he saw now that she would run, run away; outrun this ship, outrun NIDS, outrun the horrible fate she had been dealt.

And even as the soldiers began to close in, their guns raised, Gerald's hope triumphed. He believed with all his heart, with every ounce of his being, that Shadow and Maria would escape their fate. They would live! Maria would live!

Run, Maria! Run!

The hallways blurred around them as they ran, the stars on their left and metal beams on their right melting together as they quickly covered distance. If they kept up this pace, they'd reach the hangar within half an hour. And then...

Shadow glanced back. Even pacing himself, he was of course several feet ahead of Maria. *She's still going?* he wondered. The girl was gasping for breath, clearly exhausted, but still she continued to push herself. She was weak, and should have run out of endurance long ago.

"You want to take a break?" Shadow suggested, slowing down, but his young companion ran right past him.

She shook her head, and as she passed, Shadow saw that her eyes were on fire. That strange fear, the feeling that she was in danger, continued to push her on. Plus, it was time. The ARK held nothing but bad memories. Memories of her sickness; memories of the doctor. Memories of Rei. There was nothing left for her here.

Shadow was still for a moment longer, shocked by the look in her eyes. She had been doing that lately, surprising him with the force of her resolve. Even when she was shaking, crying, terrified, still she pushed on and on. The ice-blue eyes that once held nothing but kindness now melted with something new: Determination.

Shadow caught up in a moment, looking askance at her. It had only been two or three days that they had been together, yet she had changed so much. Still the same in many ways, but different too. He wondered if she even realized that she had become stronger.

"Fugitives! Remain where you are!" Shadow and Maria skidded to a stop, the former stepping protectively in front of her. Before them stood a dozen G.U.N. soldiers, weapons trained on Shadow.

Maria stared. The soldiers only glanced at her, all their focus on the main priority. She, of course, wasn't a target. Without thinking, she shoved Shadow to the ground and dashed forward, charging at the men.

A few guns went off, but they were aiming where Shadow had been standing. "Don't shoot at her!" one of them yelled.

Distracted, none of them saw it coming when Shadow jumped to his feet and bowled through them, the chaos surrounding him sending them flying. Before any could recover, the hedgehog grabbed Maria and bolted.

"Don't do that!" he reprimanded, letting go of her once they had turned a corner. Her daring actions had stunned even him, and he struggled to catch his breath. "What if they had shot you?"

Maria laughed, light-hearted, though Shadow could tell her heart was pounding. "They don't care about me."

Shadow looked away. He wouldn't trust them to be above that. "Be careful. I can't lose you now." He glanced back, catching sight of a few soldiers who had already recovered chasing after them. "They're coming."

The young girl pushed herself harder, nearly outpacing Shadow. *We're almost there!* Her eyes glittered with excitement. She knew she was being careless, and yet, she felt free already. Almost home.

They made it to the great hangar doors, the last barrier between them and safety.

Shadow felt the sting of bullets on his back, felt Maria's fist clenching his as she struggled to keep running. Her legs had long gone numb, her chest tightened until she thought she might just collapse. But keep running she did, her arm reaching out towards the wide metal doors.

They slid open on approach, and the pair burst in, skidding and nearly collapsing as they frantically rushed for the escape pods next to the wall. Soldiers, right on their heels, screamed and shot wildly in a vain attempt to end their getaway. Shadow and Maria ducked as bullets whizzed by, but they didn't slow down. The end was just within their grasp.

They tumbled into the first small glass cylinder they came upon. Shadow slammed a button on the control panel, and the doors slid shut.

And then they stopped. Blinking, the two exchanged wide-eyed glances. Outside of the escape pod, soldiers screamed and shot at the glass, but it refused to crack. A slow smile crept up Maria's face. This was it. Suddenly, for the first time in forever, they were safe. They had escaped.

The men lowered their weapons, staring, almost as much in awe as the two friends within. Beaming, Maria waved at the dumbfounded men. And then, as Shadow hit the launch button, she watched them disappear.

Wrapped in stars. Fate averted, destiny overcome. Maria slid to her knees and rested her head on the glass, the coolness seeping into her. Safe, safe, safe. It had been so long since she felt safe.

"Stupid." Shadow leaned against the wall, arms crossed, his serious face not betraying the overwhelming relief he felt. "Why would you wave at them?"

Maria laughed and closed her eyes. "We've done it, Shadow." Opening her eyes and gazing at the twinkling stars, those lights she would soon leave behind forever, she was suddenly laughing. "We've done it!"

Shadow finally allowed himself to smile. Her happiness was contagious, filling him too with the same joy. This is what he had wanted. Maria would finally have a chance to realize her future, the things they had once dreamed of together, so very long ago.

His smile faded as he turned his eyes to the blue planet below. This was far from perfect circumstances. "It's not going to be easy, Maria. G.U.N. is surely on its way already, and our faces will be everywhere. We may never be able to leave the wilderness." He paused, looking away. "I wish I could give you better."

"That's okay." Maria smiled brightly, still on her knees staring at the stars. "Even if it's not exactly what I always dreamed of, I'll still be glad we got to go to Earth together."

Shadow smiled slightly, reassured. He would do his best to make her happy. Even if they had to run from G.U.N. forever, she had to be happy.

The escape pod dropped through the Earth's atmosphere, parting the clouds as it went. Maria stared in awe at the snowy expanse below, zipping by too fast for her to hardly perceive. Shadow crouched next to her, holding her arm. "Hang on. The landing may be rough."

The ground came close dizzyingly fast. Flames and wind surged around the escape pod, slowing its fall in a bright spectacle, but it did little to dampen the shock of their fall. The pod crashed into the ground, skidding through it and tearing up the earth before it finally came to a hard stop.

When Maria opened her eyes, she found herself clinging to Shadow. Dazed, she lifted her eyes, barely comprehending the sight of the world above. The sky that had once always been black around her was now a pale blue, and so far away. They sat still there together, watching it.

After a moment, she managed to struggle to her feet and clamber out of the vessel, followed closely by her friend. Maria hopped out into the crater they'd left, standing in the torn-up dirt and gazing about in awe. Even Shadow was unable to mask his expression.

"What is it?" Shadow whispered, reaching up to touch one of those white piles that covered the world.

"Snow," Maria said quietly, pulling herself out of the embankment and stumbling into it. The air was cold, the snow more so, but through her wonder she could hardly feel it biting into her skin as she picked up a handful of the stuff.

Suddenly flooded again with laughter, she stood, making a sloppy first snowball, and tossed it at Shadow as he climbed out of the ditch. Taken off guard, the hedgehog nearly stumbled back into the dirt. "What was that for?" he asked, brushing the snow out of his fur and shivering.

"Come on, let's have a snowball fight!" Maria cried, giggling at Shadow's unamused expression.

"Maria, we don't have time for this," Shadow said, fighting to keep back a smile. He was happy to see her so carefree again. She'd been so quiet and sad ever since... Well, what had happened with Rei, of course. Since he had met her again after all those years.

But his memories had almost fully recovered now, and he remembered how cheerful she had once been. That happiness was slowly returning. Like they were kids again.

The girl stood on the path ahead of him, waiting, an expectant smile on her face. So Shadow, reaching down to pick up some snow, smiled slightly to himself for a moment then chased after her. Maria beamed and ran into the woods, her heart threatening to burst with joy.

They could finally be happy.

"And this is a tree! Um... a pine tree, I think. See? It has little sharp leaves instead of normal ones. Shadow? Are you listening?"

Shadow blinked. He was trying to relax, but his old instincts were kicking in. He'd spotted a ship's lights flaring in the darkened sky an hour ago, so G.U.N. was officially after them. Plus, the cold winter was beginning to bite through his fur. Though Maria tramped happily on, chattering all the way, she needed to get to shelter before she froze in her thin jacket and skirt.

And it was starting to get dark. Shadow had already caught glimpses of strange little creatures staring out at them from the underbrush. Bigger things may lurk in this forest at night.

He caught sight of it then: A hole cut into a pile of rocks, nestled among a thick group of trees. Shadow led Maria there and peered into the shallow cave, kicking snow out of it. "G.U.N. will be

searching in planes. We can't outrun them, so we're staying here for tonight."

"Okay." Maria crawled in and sat down as Shadow attempted to make a fire, something he vaguely remembered being taught by the Professor, years ago. Survival skills had been just as important as weapon proficiency. In another life, he would have been an unthinking robot winning wars alongside other soldiers. He never would have known the kindness of a little girl.

Maria picked at her dress, now streaked with brown. "What is this?"

Shadow looked up and nearly laughed at her innocence. "Dirt, I think." Not that he knew any better, but he felt more at ease in nature than he did among the artificial labs.

Sparks jumped out of Shadow's makeshift fire pit, and a pitiful flame burst to life, warming the two slightly.

"It gets into everything." Maria scrubbed at her dress but the substance refused to come off. Suddenly she shivered, the cold finally reaching her, and huddled towards the fire.

Shadow stared at her, then looked away. This was a girl who had never known cold, or dirt, or hunger, or pain. Just a few days ago, she had been living her life in relative ease. Yet despite her future on Earth surely containing all of these things, she still couldn't stop smiling.

"I'm heading out to look around." Shadow stood. "Stay here."

Maria laughed. "I'm not going to run away."

Shadow looked back. *Sometimes I wonder, why did you stop being afraid of me?* "I know."

He walked off, kicking snow over his footsteps as he went. Into the twilight forest he wandered, stepping through shadows and

moonlight, searching for something... Something.

Shadow took a breath, breathing in the crisp air. He'd never felt more alive than at this moment, surrounded by life and energy, rather than in the artificial ARK, breathing the stagnant, recycled air. It was all he'd ever known, yet he felt, for once, almost safe. He had been born into a cold, lifeless world, but it was here under the stars where he belonged.

Standing in the thicket, the day's fading light cascading down onto him, he suddenly understood Maria's desperation to reach this place. Her need to be free, even if only for a little while.

Shadow's gaze was drawn to the sky. Beams of light were falling from the stars, and his keen hearing picked up a distant mechanical whirling. They were searching. He had better head back.

The hedgehog tramped off through the snow again, trailing his hand over the trees as he went. What a strange texture, rough and bumpy beneath his fingers. On the ARK everything was smooth metal.

Shadow stopped at the edge of the tree line as he reached the cave again. Maria sat blithely on top of the cave, swinging her legs as she stared dreamily off into the sunset. The dying light set her hair on fire, illuminating her spirit until the child seemed to glow.

He stared. That expression... Filled with so much hope. Finally at peace.

Shadow blinked as something cold landed on his nose. Maria noticed him then and smiled, but the spell of serenity was unbroken. "It's snowing."

The black hedgehog stared at the hazy grey-gold sky as flecks of white drifted slowly down onto them. He went to sit beside Maria on the rocks, and the two friends watched as the light began to fade.

"Aren't you afraid?" Shadow asked. His red eyes sparkled in the last rays of sunlight, head resting on one knee as he gazed into the distance.

"Of what?"

"What's going to happen to us, here on Earth. It isn't over, Maria. It will never end. G.U.N. will always be chasing us, until..."

Maria's face lost its light, turning to stone. "Until I die."

Shadow glanced at her with alarm, then quickly looked away. How could she admit that so bluntly?

The girl relaxed, but the resolve in her eyes only grew stronger. "I'm not afraid. I've waited my whole life for this, Shadow; you know that. So I'm not going to let fear ruin my last few months on Earth. No matter what, I refuse to stop being cheerful."

She smiled then, the previous dreamy look returning. "I want us to be happy here, both of us."

And then the sun was gone, masking her face in darkness. They stayed there long after, basking in the stars' feeble lights. Until the cold set in and they were forced to take shelter from the wind, they remained together, listening to the quiet.

But even once Maria had fallen asleep next to the fire, the dirty cave weaving dust into her gold hair, Shadow couldn't sleep. He stared at her, watching her rest, peaceful.

You're wrong. You are afraid, he thought. But despite that, you still do your best to be happy. You refuse to give up hope.

Maria... You don't have to be afraid. As long as I'm here, please don't be scared anymore. It's over now.

"S-Shadow? C-can we stop again?"

Shadow glanced at Maria. They had landed in a more temperate side of the UF, so it wasn't dangerously cold at least. But if they kept this up for much longer, she'd definitely freeze. "Not yet. If we keep stopping, G.U.N. will catch up with us. Plus, exercise will keep you warmer than a fire made of sticks."

Maria sniffled. "That doesn't make me feel better."

"Just a little farther." For Maria's sake, Shadow remained optimistic, but the day was winding down again and they needed a place to take shelter. Plus, the kid was probably starving. She hadn't complained a single time, but that pained expression spoke for her.

Hours wore on, the daylight fading again. Their shadows stretched through the trees, chasing them as they tramped tiredly on. It hadn't snowed today, so they only had to wade through yesterday's piles, but it was still a wearying endeavour.

Eventually, darkness set in. Shadow had better night vision than Maria, but the moon was waning and the forest's shadows were long, so even he had trouble seeing. So much trouble that he nearly ran into the wall.

Maria stumbled forward, tripping through the snow despite Shadow's hand guiding her. "What is that?" She put her hands on the wall, tracing her fingers along the wooden boards. "I think it's a house. Where's the door? Maybe they can help us."

They searched along the wall and finally found the entrance. It was unlocked, so the hedgehog blithely pushed it open and stepped inside, shaking the snow out of his fur.

"Shadow! You're supposed to *knock*," Maria chided, but she stepped in as well, peering around. She could barely see, but it didn't look like anyone was here.

"Knock?" The hedgehog, having spent the better part of his years in a containment chamber, was unused to human customs. "Why?"

The girl shook her head and walked forward with her hands out, soon hitting brick. "I think this is a fireplace. Can you go get some sticks?"

Shadow complied, heading back out into the dark wood. He returned a few minutes later with some branches and set to work lighting a small fire. Soon enough, the room was enveloped in a warm glow, and though the howling wind rattled the windows and door, it could not for all its efforts extinguish the fire.

The small cabin was sparsely furnished, the two could see now. There was a table in the corner, a coarse rug on the floor, and two bunks chained to the wall, one above the other. Some windows let a little light into the room. That was all.

A fine layer of dust had settled on every surface, and the home itself felt uninhabited, so it was clear that it hadn't been lived in in quite some time. They had found their refuge.

The two sat in comfortable silence together, staring at the dancing embers. Once the cabin had warmed up considerably, Maria stood up and headed over to the wall, collapsing onto the lower bed a moment later. She stretched like a cat and stared at the wooden ceiling.

"I haven't slept in a real bed in so long," the girl yawned.

"Five days?" Shadow laughed.

Maria blinked, her blue eyes widening. "Oh, yeah. I forgot..." She sat up and stared at Shadow. "A week ago..."

She blinked, gazing solemnly at the ground for a moment, and fell onto her back again. "How is it that everything changed so quickly? That only a week ago I was living on the ARK in peace?"

Shadow stared at her for a moment, then turned his gaze to the fire. "Do you wish that all this had never happened?"

Maria thought about that. Grandfather, who she would never see again. How even here on Earth, she would begin to slowly waste away. Having to leave Shadow behind, alone, his only friend in the world gone too soon.

But she also thought about the future that had once awaited her. Her grandfather giving up on her only chance at life. Her old friend, forgotten and alone in a cage, killed or manipulated simply because of the powers he possessed. And always, always standing in Rei's shadow, never able to live up to his bravery. Forever a frightened little girl, until the bitter end.

In these few short days, she had given Shadow a chance. She had begun to move on from Rei's unjust death, and to put her lingering fear of Shadow to rest. She had finally learned how to be brave, to keep fighting even when she just wanted to give up, and that was something she couldn't turn her back on.

"No," Maria finally said. "I won't take anything back."

Shadow grunted. "Wouldn't you be better off?"

The girl laughed wearily. "To live another year? Why?" She wiped her eyes, ashamed of the brimming tears. "I had never been able to help anyone, Shadow. When Rei needed me, I... I couldn't even move! I couldn't do anything!"

"That wasn't your fault!" Shadow snapped. He clutched his head, rubbing his temple. Those memories had mostly returned, but trying to think about that moment still made his head spin. His tone softened. "You were just a kid."

Maria smiled, unfazed by his brief burst of anger. "I'm still a kid, but even so I managed to do something. This way, I had the chance to

help you. Even if I accomplished nothing else with my life... At least I could do that."

The hedgehog remained silent, turning back to the fire. Stupid girl. She was so selfless! Why could she never think of herself? Without him... She might have had a better life, a childhood less tormented by horror.

Yet she still chose him. If that day were to come again, the day where that little girl pressed her hands into the glass and asked him to be her friend, she would make the same decision.

Why?

That was the question that most perplexed Shadow. Even once Maria drifted off to sleep, he remained as the night wore on, watching and wondering. Why him?

Why...?

Maria awoke with a jolt. When she opened bleary eyes, Shadow was hovering over her, hand on her shoulder. He said nothing, but the sudden chill that ran down Maria's spine was all she needed to know, and she stood quickly.

Shadow kicked over the rug, revealing a small trapdoor hidden perfectly beneath. It squeaked, the hinges rusty, as he opened it. They descended quickly, pitch black consuming them as Shadow replaced the carpet and pulled the door closed.

Moments later they heard the front door slam open, nearly coming off its hinges. Maria jumped, scrambling to find Shadow in the dark and running into him. He silently grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the wall.

Though the hedgehog had better night vision than any normal human or creature, not even he could see well in pitch darkness.

Still, he managed to find his way to a pile of crates in the corner and crouched down behind them.

"G.U.N.! Anyone here come out with your hands up!" Footsteps thundered above, until the shaking Maria wondered if the ceiling would come crashing down on them.

She had thought she was used to this by now, being chased by soldiers, fearing for her life. But Earth had given her hope. A part of her had thought it was finally over.

She knew now that it may never, really, be over.

Maria pulled her knees to her chest. Even if the soldiers disappeared, even if they never came back, that same terror would still linger forever. She would never be able to step outside without peering around, wondering who could be hiding behind the trees, in the snowdrifts.

If they escaped this alive, that was. They were cornered here. Shadow's chaos powers had barely any time to recharge. He was still injured, if only slightly; the bandage had fallen off somewhere on the ARK, revealing the somewhat healed but still nasty graze wound. And to top it off they were both hungry and scared - well, at the very least she was scared, and what use could she be anyway?

That trapdoor wasn't hard to find. And once the soldiers got down here... Where could they hide?

Shadow glanced over at Maria. Pressed between a box and the corner of the wall, he could see her shaking. In an attempt to be comforting, he reached out and touched her arm. She jolted at his touch, but relaxed within a moment.

"Thank you," she whispered softly, her eyes dull in the dark. "Thank you for bringing me to Earth, Shadow."

"Don't say it like that!" Shadow snapped. "I can fight off a couple soldiers. I'm not going to let this end here."

Just as Shadow finished speaking, the trapdoor flew open, and the pair pressed their backs against the crate. The hedgehog quickly crouched in front of Maria, ready to spring at a moment's notice. Neither of them dared move a muscle as flashlights swept over the ground. Both were in plain sight should the light touch them.

"G.U.N. soldiers!" they repeated. "Anyone here come out now!"

Shadow tensed and pulled back slightly as the light swept by him. He clenched his fists together as red sparks flew from his palms. It was only natural for chaos to course through him in times of danger, but now he struggled to keep this instinct under control, as the lights would quickly give them away.

But nothing happened. The soldiers stomped around for a bit longer, waving their flashlights about, but the beams never landed upon them.

"Clear!" one of the soldiers yelled, and they were gone as quickly as they came.

Neither of them moved for a long time. Finally, they relaxed, and Shadow sat down again. A ball of blue chaos appeared in his hand, lighting their faces up. "They're still up there," he whispered, listening to the rowdy soldiers knocking around furniture and stomping about.

"What do we do?" Maria asked.

Shadow paused. "Wait it out. If they're still there in the morning..." His face was grim, and Maria looked away. She hated the thought of Shadow having to kill the soldiers, but she couldn't exactly argue.

The chaos flickered out, and the girl was blind in the darkness again. She almost missed the flashlights. "Get some sleep," Shadow said.

She complied, doing her best to get comfortable with concrete as her bed and wood as her pillow. As she closed her eyes, watching the colours dance behind her eyelids and listening to the gruff chatter of the soldiers, she wondered if this was it. If she would fall asleep in this dark grave and never wake up.

When Maria's consciousness returned, she was leaning against Shadow, having attempted to find a more comfortable resting spot in her sleep. His even, controlled breathing told her that he was already awake. She stretched, sore from her uncomfortable, spotty rest, and glanced in her friend's general direction.

How could he stand doing nothing for such long periods of time, anyway? She knew he'd been confined to a bare room for five years of his life, not much to do but sleep, eat, and train. And now he had been up in the dark for hours, possibly all night. Did he ever get bored?

"Are they still there?" Maria whispered with a yawn. She clutched her stomach as it grumbled in protest.

Shadow nodded, then, realizing she couldn't see it, said, "Yeah." He looked over at her silhouette, hunched over in apparent pain.
"When's the last time you ate?"

Maria thought. That apple Shadow had tossed her, and the nondescript food she had found in a bag... That was it, wasn't it?
"Before I got kidnapped..." The girl blinked, furrowing her brow.
"Nearly a week."

She had been feeling weaker now... The thrill of Earth had given her some strength back, but now she could feel it flowing out of her.

Shadow stood abruptly, prepared to tear the soldiers apart. Eyes wide, Maria grabbed at his arm. "Shadow, no!" she whispered. She tried to clamber to her feet but dizziness forced her back down.

"There's no way I'm going to let you *starve!*" he retaliated, pulling his arm away at that. "It could take another week for them to go away, and by then..."

He didn't know the details of her condition, but he knew that she had a lot of physical problems, and for her age she was extremely small and underweight. She wouldn't last much longer without sustenance.

Hardening his resolve, he started towards the trap door, but stopped when he heard a sniffle and a tiny voice. "We can't kill anyone else."

The hedgehog sighed. He wanted to ignore her and get this over with, but he wasn't stupid or heartless. He knew how much the deaths of everyone on the ARK were weighing on her.

Shadow turned and crouched down next to her, his voice low. "You're not doing anything, Maria. I'm the one hurting people. This is on *me*, not you. Okay?"

Maria stared at his dark form before her. She hated this. She hated this life she had been forced into. She hated the lengths Shadow had to go to protect her. And she hated that people had to die for someone like her, some kid who had never done anything for anyone. Grandfather, Shadow, Rei, the people on the ARK... Why had they tried so hard to keep her safe?

"Okay," she whimpered. She was being juvenile, she knew, crying over the fiftieth person she had seen killed. But it was wearing on her young mind.

Shadow stood up and walked away. She heard something, something almost like *sorry*, but by the time she looked up he had burst through the trapdoor. The light quickly faded as it slammed shut again, and the little girl covered her ears to block out the screaming and crackle of chaos.

He found her like that, scrunched into a ball with her hands over her ears, still crying long after the gunshots had stopped. Light spilled

down through the open door, illuminating the hedgehog from behind, but she wouldn't look at him. He offered a hand and eventually she took it. Before she could even wipe her eyes and mutter an apology for being so silly, she suddenly found herself pulled into a hug.

Maria stilled, surprised. She obviously knew that he cared about her, but Shadow had never really shown her... kindness before. At least not like this. Of course, she hadn't expected it, when his life had been filled with manipulation and cruelty, and displays of affection were something he never knew. But now...

She hugged him tighter, crying shamelessly until the tears finally stopped. And she was reminded of a certain moment, so very long ago. A time when she had run to him and pulled him into a hug, and she tore down all the walls with her.

She ate the food he handed to her, pointedly ignoring the chaos-charred pile of bags in the corner, but eventually her curiosity got the best of her. "What happened?"

"Led them far away," Shadow replied, chewing on his own apple. He had never cared about food that much, but after going over a week without it, he had sure missed it. "They'll find the bodies and hopefully they'll think animals did it and leave us alone."

Maria nodded and tried not to think about it. It still hurt, knowing that people were dying. It still left scars. But she couldn't hold it against Shadow, because if he hadn't killed for her, then it would have been their lives reaped instead, over and over again. It didn't fix it. It didn't help her forget. But she understood.

When she finished eating she collapsed on the rug next to the fire, gazing into the embers until she slipped into a trance. For a moment, Maria drifted away into daydreams.

Shadow stared at her back for a long time, thinking. He hadn't had a chance to do that in a while, but it was peaceful here at least.

Morning light shone through the window and dust particles danced about, settling on Maria's hair. Absently she played with a strand, wondering how she would ever get the tangles out without a brush.

She was startled when Shadow finally spoke. "Why?"

Maria rolled over to look at him. His head was tilted. "Why what?"

"Why do you..." Shadow hesitated. "... care about our enemies so much? I know I've asked before, but..." The hedgehog stared, red eyes on her. He was curious.

Maria furrowed her brow and stared up at the wood ceiling. "Don't forget to be kind," she recited softly. "That's what my grandfather always told me. Which is funny because he wasn't always very nice." She giggled, but her grin soon faded.

"I know it's simple, but I think that's what my dad used to..." Maria stopped and sat up, looking over at her friend.

Seeing his confused stare, she smiled. "That doesn't matter. The point is, violence or fear isn't always the answer. After all, even when I was afraid of you, I didn't let myself run away. And look where that got us."

Her smile widened. "Sometimes you have to run away. Sometimes you have to fight back. But sometimes, kindness is enough."

Shadow stared at her for a moment, but he let his own smile cross his face. So naive, even after everything she had witnessed. But maybe she was right. Now that they had finally escaped this hell, now that they were safe together, maybe kindness would be enough.

That night, they watched through the window as search lights dotted the sky.

A week passed.

Maria opened the door and stepped outside, breathing in the cool air. She shivered through her thin clothes as she sat down on the steps, leaning on the door and staring at the sky. It was a beautiful night, the starry horizon only obscured by snowy treetops. Small, curious creatures gazed at the girl from the underbrush, then turned and scampered back into the forest.

The child cocked her head. Something was... missing. It was quiet, the only sound the distant whirling of snow and tree branches swaying in the wind.

It hit her suddenly, and she sprang to her feet. "Shadow! Shadow!" she cried.

The hedgehog burst outside, a gun stolen from the soldiers in his hands. Seeing the beaming face of his friend, he lowered the weapon. "What?"

Wordlessly, Maria pointed to the sky. Shadow noticed what was missing immediately, and stumbled to sit down beside her.

For the past week, this had been life. Staying up all night, watching the lights through the windows, listening to the distant screaming of alarms. Always alert, always waiting, as their food supplies dwindled.

But now... Now.

The search lights were gone.

Days began to slip by, marked by the small white pills Maria took every night.

"Hey, look at this. Maria!" The girl, who was making shadow puppets with the flashlight, jumped and snapped the light back into place. Shadow peeled the lid off a box and peeked inside. "Point the flashlight down here."

She obliged and the two peered in. Inside the box were stacks of what looked to be dried meat. In another crate was various other foods: bags of nuts, dried fruit and vegetables, rice, beans, crackers, and more.

Gingerly Maria picked up a piece of meat and nibbled at it. "It tastes okay," she said. With wide eyes she looked at all the crates and barrels down here. "This is enough food to last us until..." Realizing what she was leading up to, she quickly said, "Um, there's a lot of food."

Shadow ignored or didn't notice the implication. "This should last us both a long time, so we don't have to worry about food at least."

"I was worried you were going to start killing rabbits," Maria said with a sigh of relief. She loved chasing the fluffy white creatures around, but she didn't know if she could have brought herself to eat one.

Shadow leaned against a barrel and smirked. "First murderous soldiers, now rabbits?"

Maria crossed her arms and pouted. "Don't be mean!"

Shadow laughed, causing the girl to get even more worked up, but he wasn't listening to her. Now with their future secured, a warm place to stay and food for years, he was finally able to relax. They were safe. Maria was safe. And now, finally, he could let the regrets torturing his mind slip away.

Shadow stumbled through the door, startling Maria, who was sitting serenely in front of the fire wrapped in a thin blanket. It'd been a cold day today, and Shadow had wandered off at dusk with promises to be back soon. He left her with a gun, but she'd shoved it out of sight under the mattress as soon as he had gone.

Now here he was, carrying a bag bulging with... something. Maria helped him drag it to the middle of the room and the two sat down,

opening it. The little girl pulled out a blue blanket twice as big as she was, laughing as the soft fabric fell over her head and she struggled to pull it all out.

"Where did you even find these?" Maria giggled as she emerged from under the blanket, hair frazzled.

Shadow didn't answer, but pulled out a few more blankets and some winter clothing in about Maria's size. She tried on the jackets and boots immediately, and hopped around excitedly in her new clothes.

"Now I can go outside!" Maria cried, eyes twinkling as she walked about in the clothes that were just a bit too big for her. Even Shadow couldn't help but look amused at seeing how thrilled she was.

After a moment she paused and turned back to her friend. "Shadow, where did you get all this stuff?"

The hedgehog gave a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it."

"You didn't go to a city, did you?" Maria fell to her knees, concerned. "Where did you even get the money for it?"

"Money?" Shadow stared at her blankly. He had an idea about money and stores because of the dictionary of words he had been born with, but he had very little grasp on the concept.

"You stole these?!" Maria squealed, then covered her face with her hands. "Oh Shadow, how could you?"

Stealing Shadow understood, and he crossed his arms. "I couldn't just keep you stuck in this house until spring."

Maria groaned, suddenly less excited about the clothes. "You didn't get hurt at least, did you?"

"Well." Shadow smirked. "The person in there wasn't very happy."

The rest of the night was spent, much to Shadow's protest, trying to patch up his wounds with the small, primitive first aid kit they had found in the basement. When the poor hedgehog was wrapped in enough gauze to satisfy his friend, they fell straight into their beds, both of them exhausted.

Maria sighed as she lay in her bed, snuggled into a thick blanket and fuzzy pajamas. She felt bad for the stealing, but she figured that perhaps the store owner would have relented if he knew what had happened to them. Not to mention she knew she was a hypocrite, for the girl had snatched quite a few things from her grandfather before. Still! It was different!

Well, at the very least, she was warmer than she had been in a long time. So, trying not to feel too bad, she gladly fell asleep, wrapped in warmth.

Maria tramped through the snow, testing out her new boots by leaving footprints everywhere. She had been used to the bite of the cold in her thin shirt and flowing skirt. But now in a big black jacket with a furry hood, thick winter pants, and fuzzy mittens, she was completely warm.

Even Shadow wore a jacket to combat the cold, which perhaps fit him even less than it did Maria. As short and thin as he was, at least compared to humans, even a child-sized jacket was too big for him.

The two headed out into the forest, having decided to simply wander for the day. Maria had worn nothing but slipper-shoes on the ARK, as there was no rough terrain to contend with, so she often tripped over snowbanks in these thick shoes. Eventually, she got the hang of it and was marching happily alongside Shadow.

It was a beautiful day outside. Birds that had lingered behind sang lonely songs, and the sun sparkled through bare tree branches that stabbed the azure sky. The snow around them glittered with light, unmarred by human footprints.

Maria stopped occasionally to hand curious rabbits and squirrels the dried sunflower seeds she had pocketed, or to play in the pretty snow, but Shadow was happily to simply be walking, breathing in the crisp, cold air, lost in his own thoughts. Sensing this, the girl decided not to bother him with her antics and let him walk on alone.

After a while of wandering, the two stumbled suddenly on a clearing. It was so small and hidden by bushes and tangled branches that they may have easily walked around it. But, pushing through the underbrush, they found it there. As if it was waiting.

Maria stared up in awe as she crunched through the snow. In the middle of this glade lay a great tree, a beast of a wood whose diameter seemed the width of two people, arms outstretched. It reached into the sky, its branches spread out like arms, piercing the blue with a million hefty branches.

"Look at how big it is!" Maria cried with glee, running to it and putting her arms around it as if to hug it, though she couldn't even get them around the front half.

Shadow snorted, causing the girl to indignantly demand what he was laughing at, though secretly the hedgehog was too in awe of this great tree. Just not enough to give it a hug.

He settled down at the wide base of the wood, keeping an eye on the girl as she hoisted herself up onto the branches, barely able to pull herself up each time. Finding that she wasn't afraid of heights, she clambered up a few more feet and settled herself there, swinging her legs as she gazed happily towards the sun that was beginning to make its way towards the horizon.

Maria felt... peaceful. Alive. But sitting here, surrounded by the beauty of Earth, watching the sparkling snowy expanse, the clouds drifting across the sky, and knowing that Shadow could be here to experience it all too, she felt something else.

... Happy. She was happy.

Truly, it had been too long. Her last glimpses of happiness had been five years ago, when she had spent her nights with Rei and Shadow. After that, she had felt detached, drifting emotionless through life. But, finally, she could be really, truly happy again. Up here in the air, she had no burdens, no regrets. She could fly.

"I think I could stay here forever," Maria said aloud.

Shadow looked up, her voice drowned out by the wind. "What?"

Maria said nothing to him, but she smiled with all her might.

Awhile later, she finally came down and sat with Shadow, the two of them gazing at the darkening sky, a peaceful silence between them. Happy, happy, happy. That was all Maria could feel now. It was strange, but she welcomed it.

As the stars began to poke through the veil, Maria knew they would soon have to leave, though she would have preferred to stay in this moment until the end of time. She closed her eyes, listening to the tree branches waving above her, the quiet that began to envelop the forest.

"Thank you, Shadow," she said softly, so softly that she barely snapped the hedgehog out of his reverie. "Thank you for giving me the chance to come to Earth."

Shadow said nothing, but he, too, was happy.

They left soon after, but Maria never wanted to forget that moment, that first feeling of happiness that broke through the fog that had always surrounded her, allowing her, for a moment, to feel like she could fly.

This was their lives now. Wandering through the forest, visiting the great tree, watching as the days fell away.

Sometimes they spent their time happily together, Maria chattering on, her spiels broken up by the occasional snowball fight. Sometimes one of them felt pensive, and that day, they were content to walk quietly together. And sometimes they split up and wandered alone, always close, but just needing a little time to themselves.

In the urban world, far away from Shadow and Maria's quiet forest, the hunt for the escapees began to simmer down. The scientists from the ARK were executed or interred forever, and the public moved on to newer stories. They stopped peeking nervously outside, waiting for a murderous black Faunas and the sick little girl they'd been told was being held hostage to turn up in their yards. And besides the occasional, obligated search party, G.U.N. began to give up.

The days, weeks, and months fell away, and the memory of Shadow and Maria along with it.

Maria began taking her medicine every other day.

"Are you sure it's safe?" Maria asked nervously, darting around the room as she picked up supplies and put them down again. "What if somebody recognizes us? What if - What if -"

"Maria, relax," Shadow said, exasperated. "All of my markings are covered up by this coat and I'm sure there are plenty of black hedgehogs and blonde girls around."

"Together?" Maria was skeptical. "Don't you know about Faunas and humans? Humans, uh... They're not always very... Very nice." She looked away. "So seeing some kid walking around with a hedgehog would make people suspicious, and they might remember."

"It's a small town, not like the city I stole from. G.U.N. has barely any presence here, so they may not have even seen the news. Don't

worry." Shadow shrugged. "Besides, if someone does recognize us, then we just run away."

Maria deflated. "Fine, I'll try not to worry," she mumbled, but a moment later she pulled out a small hat, clearly intended for humans. "You at least have to wear this though! People might recognize your quills!"

"How do you think I'm going to fit into that?!"

After a few minutes of struggling with the laws of physics, Maria finally left Shadow alone, opting to bundle up her own blonde hair instead, and they headed out for the town. It was an hour-long walk, but soon, the trees broke away and revealed the bustling streets and cities. Maria couldn't help but stare, her anxiety melted away. Even in this small town, she'd never seen so many people at once before.

Shadow looked at her expression in exasperation. "Maria, try to act natural. If you look like *that*, people are going to notice us."

Maria, embarrassed, put on a neutral expression, but she couldn't keep the wonder out of her eyes as Shadow took her hand and they slipped into the square. So many, many people. Yet none of them seemed to notice her at all. On the ARK she was used to capturing everyone's attention, always being talked to or waved at, barely any privacy. But now she felt alone in this crowd.

They walked about for a bit, simply observing the people, the buildings. Maria couldn't help but run her hands over them as she passed by. Little houses were strange enough, but these towering shops and homes... Having lived essentially inside her entire life, buildings and streets were such a strange concept.

Eventually, the two meandered into a small park, dotted with abandoned children's playsets. Some people wandered through occasionally, children ran about, and teenagers leaned casually against trees, watching everyone.

Shadow and Maria swiped the snow off a bench and settled there. The girl watched people, head tilted, trying to pick up on their mannerisms. They moved more fluidly than her, with more ease and confidence. She became suddenly self-aware, of how every move of hers was timid and careful. Even with a normal face, just another human like the rest of them, it was a wonder that she didn't stick out.

"Where do you want to go?" Shadow asked, arms crossed as he tried to shake his habit of scanning every person he saw for potential danger.

Maria looked around. "What can we even do besides walk around? It's not like we have money."

Shadow grinned and pulled out some money from his coat pocket. Maria covered her face, exasperated. When had he even stolen that? "Shadow..."

"We need it more than they do." Pushing her, he continued, "So what was it you said about hot chocolate once?"

A few minutes later, the duo was walking towards a small, cute coffee shop they had seen on the way to the park. "I feel bad," Maria mumbled.

"Don't," Shadow said. Either some person got to keep their money, or a dying girl got her simple wish of hot chocolate. Even if he cared about stealing, he knew where his priorities lay.

Bells jingled as Shadow pushed the door open, and a thirty-something woman with a brown ponytail looked up from the desk. "Welcome to Lina's Cafe," she greeted with a warm smile that didn't break the curiosity in her eyes. "How may I serve you?"

Maria noticed that they were both getting "the look", but the prospect of talking to another person was too much for her to care. Plus, a kid who looked like a near-teenager with the body of an eight-year-old,

bundled up in mismatched clothing, and a hedgehog, which was a rarity already, in a human-sized coat... Wasn't that a sight?

"Can we have some hot chocolate?" Maria asked excitedly, practically bouncing in the big swivel chair in front of the counter.

Seeing the expression on Maria's face, the critical shopkeeper couldn't help but be amused. "Coming right up. Make yourselves comfortable."

The place was dead, with only a few other customers lingering about. Maria looked around the shop decorated with homely beige walls and brown and white tiles. Little booths sat next to windows, red chairs providing contrast. And it was scrubbed cleaner than the ARK's smooth metal walls.

"Here you are," the woman said, placing the mugs before them, and winked. "Careful. It's hot."

Maria could barely stop herself from downing it all at once. Seeing Shadow regard it with detached curiosity, having never had a hot drink or chocolate before, she prodded him. "Try it!"

He did. It was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, and he wasn't sure if he liked it or not. But he drank it anyway, and decided that it was alright at least.

After a few minutes of Lina pointedly watching them, broken up by her leaving to serve orders or clean tables, she finally spoke. "So, a Faunas, huh? We don't see much of you guys around here."

Shadow said nothing, sipping his hot chocolate silently, but Maria spoke. "Really? I knew hedgehogs and stuff weren't common on - um, around here, but is it really that rare?"

"Oh yeah. About the middle parts here, Faunas are pretty scarce." Lina shrugged. "Maybe it's the weather. Always too hot and too cold."

But not quite enough either way." She snorted. "Humans hardly like it here."

"So." Lina leaned over the counter. "Where you guys from?"

Shadow reached over and squeezed Maria's hand under the counter before she could talk. "A few miles away. We're just visiting."

"Hmph." Lina grinned and walked off. "Tell me when you're ready for your check."

Shadow stared at Maria questioningly. "That's how you pay for it," she whispered.

They finished their drinks quickly. Shadow, antsy about this person's inquisitiveness, was ready to go. Maria dragged behind as he left, wishful for more hot chocolate. But before she could leave, Lina caught her at the door, touching her arm.

"Maria." Lina let go, and said softly, "Maria Robotnik."

The girl recoiled, stepping back. "I... I have to go."

"Wait." The older woman regarded her for a moment, head cocked. "You're not really a hostage, are you?"

"W-what?! Is that what they're saying?" Maria cried. Lina, seeing the odd looks they were getting from the other customers, gently guided the girl to a back room. She collapsed into a chair, holding her head in her hands. "If they said that about Shadow... Then what are they saying about Grandfather? What are they saying about..."

Lina crossed her arms and laughed. "I knew those news reports were bullshit." Her smile faded. "They all say the same thing. Gerald Robotnik created an ultimate being that he planned to use to usurp the United Federation. When G.U.N. invaded, the scientists revolted and killed hundreds of soldiers. And that experiment... Shadow, he took you as hostage and escaped."

She looked at the girl, who stared at her with wide eyes. "I was prepared to call the police as soon as I saw you... But the way you were acting, the way you talked to him..." Lina smirked. "Didn't seem like something a scared little hostage would do."

"You're not going to tell anybody?" Maria asked incredulously.

Lina shrugged. "You seem happy, and you must've run away for a reason. Plus, the government is obviously lying, so why should I deliver you to a bunch of liars?"

Maria sighed with relief, slumping down in the chair. Her heart was pounding. Eyes opening suddenly, the girl sat up. "Lina... My grandfather, what happened...?"

The woman's face went dark. "Kid... You don't want to know."

Maria steeled herself. "I have to."

Sighing, Lina nodded. Suddenly, her face seemed so much more wrinkled and weary. "At this point I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it myself. They made an example of him. Took him to a public arena, got a bunch of soldiers, and..." She grimaced, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry. He's dead."

Maria had known. She'd suspected for a long time that her Grandfather was dead. But just hearing it... Hearing that he had suffered such a brutal end... Her eyes brimmed with tears and she crumpled up, sobbing.

It was at that moment that Shadow burst into the room, stopping in shock as he saw the scene before him. "What did you do to her?!" the hedgehog demanded, eyes flashing.

Before he could move, a small hand reached out to him. She pulled him closer, the only person she had left, and cried into him. Lina looked away.

They were all dead, every single person who she had ever cared about. All except for Shadow. And soon, it would be her who would die and leave him behind. It'd be *him* who was alone. What a wretched life she had lived.

When Maria's sobs finally ceased and she sat shivering in silence, Lina crouched down. "Your grandfather made the right choice, I think." She ignored Shadow's glare, gently placing a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Just look at you two. Seems to me like you keep each other going."

She straightened. "Both of you... Just always stick together. Don't let your friendship die. And, wherever he is..." Lina looked about the room, like he might be there, watching. "I think your grandfather will be happy."

Eventually, Maria collected herself and Shadow was ready to drag her out of there. Lina spoke before he could pull her away. "You guys are safe here," she said. "Nobody in this old town reads the news but me, but I'll rip up anything I see about you two. So please feel free to come back." She held up a finger and grinned. "Plus, I'll give you free hot chocolate."

"Thanks," Shadow mumbled. He was grateful that they weren't being chased down by soldiers, but he just wanted to get out of here. The hedgehog was out the door quickly, motioning for Maria to follow.

Just as she was about to, Lina stopped her again. "Head up, kid," she said, face serious. "Because someone really cares about you."

And though Maria couldn't help but feel dragged down by her past, though she was afraid of what lay in her future, she knew that Lina was right. Even after everything that had happened, she still had a friend who would stand by her side. So she found it in herself to smile.

The town became a regular visit in the two friend's schedules. Shadow was wary, and frankly disliked the frequent disruption, but he forced himself to go happily enough with Maria to town at least once or twice a week.

They visited Lina often, taking her up on the free hot chocolate. Sometimes they'd walk around, seeing the sights, peering through shop windows. Or threw snowballs in the park, laughing, not caring who saw.

And Maria loved every minute of it. Her grandfather's death had left her distraught, true. Sometimes, when she was alone in the forest, or late at night in bed when Shadow was asleep, she still cried.

But she remembered what she had promised herself. That, no matter what, she wouldn't let her bad memories drag her down. She had said she wouldn't let her past dictate her future. So, even as her life began to wind down, she decided not to waste even a single second of it.

Maria hopped down into the basement, as she did every night, to change into pajamas and take her pills. It was like any other evening. They'd spent the day on the town, and had taken a short walk just before nightfall. Nothing special, but it had been a good day.

Slipping into the soft fabric, Maria casually reached for the bottle, left on a crate. The lid popped open, but before she could take a pill out, she had to stop in shock.

One.

There was one left.

Maria slid down the wall and collapsed on the ground, the bottle still clutched in her hands. It seemed that her time had run out.

She held her hand in front of her, examining it. The pale skin, the delicate knots of bones, how easily her fingers curled and tendrils stretched. It was a miracle that she was alive in this tiny body. Soon, that hand would be still and dead.

Slowly, decisively, the girl reached into the bottle and pulled out the last little white pill. She stared at it for a moment, then, finally, put it into her mouth and swallowed it.

She lay there for a long time.

Concerned, Shadow called down. "Maria?"

Maria choked on her words, but she finally managed to gasp out a small, "Just a second."

The girl stood slowly, clutching the pill bottle with one hand, and walked towards the ladder. Shadow had to help her to her feet, for it felt as if all the strength had drained out of her lifeless body.

Seeing that she was shaking, her friend clutched her shoulders to steady her. "Maria? What - "

Wordlessly, the girl shoved the pill bottle into his hands. Shadow stared at it for a moment, not understanding... Or, perhaps, not wanting to understand. But his breath caught in his throat as the full revelation hit him, and suddenly he felt as if he needed to sit down, else he might pass out.

This is it, he realized. They had reached the final stretch. Without medicine, Maria... She would...

"I think..." Maria hesitated, unable to meet his eyes. "I think I just need to go to sleep now."

He didn't stop her as she went to bed immediately, back to the room, curled up into a tight little ball. She didn't cry. It was absolutely silent except for the crackling fire.

Shadow sat still for hours, staring into the embers, unable to think. His entire existence was blank, nothing. Without her, meaningless. He stayed that way until the dusky grey light filled the sky.

She tried so hard. She tried to stay energetic and cheerful, if only to please Shadow, who simply pretended that the terrible night had never happened. But more and more often, she found it hard to summon the willpower to pack a snowball or run through the drifts or even just give a big smile. More and more often, they were spending their days in silence, the two of them seeking solace that neither of them could give.

With every day that went by, her limbs felt heavier and heavier.

"Come on, Maria. It's a beautiful day outside. Don't you want to..." Shadow hesitated, off-put by her silent, turned-away form. Where was that little kid who was always laughing? "Don't you want to go outside?"

"Uh-uh," the girl mumbled.

"Staying in here isn't going to help you. You need to get some air, or you'll never..." He stopped then, realizing that she never was going to get better. Seeing her tiny, motionless body, he realized that was a dream he needed to let go.

"Just wanna sleep." Maria found it in herself to roll over, weakly reaching a hand out. "Stay with me?"

Shadow shut the door with a sigh. "I'm not going anywhere." He sat down by her bed and took her hand. "I won't leave you alone, Maria. Please don't worry about that."

Some times were like that: dark days, where Maria could barely find the strength to get up. Others were... almost normal. They visited

Lina less and less, and the woman said nothing despite her obvious concern. Often, she would give Maria a refill with a wink, and though Shadow still didn't trust her, he was grateful that at least something could still make his friend smile.

Most days, the two just stayed inside. Shadow found some pots in the basement, so he had been trying to figure out cooking with dried food. It often didn't end well, but Maria liked to watch him and help in little ways. If there was time, they would take a short walk or just sit on the steps outside together, watching the stars.

Maria was happy.

Maria stood in the doorway, watching the star-speckled sky and chattering with Shadow. She had become less talkative as of late, but she still managed to ramble every once in a while. It was a great relief for her stressed-out friend, who grew pensive and worried every time she showed any signs of weakness.

"Shadow? What's your favourite part about Earth?" Maria queried, sticking her hand outside in an attempt to catch a moth who hadn't gotten the memo about winter.

Shadow frowned as he observed the food he had made. Overcooked again. "Favourite thing about Earth?" he said absently, stopping to think for a moment. "There aren't any walls closing it in."

Maria giggled. "I meant something like the seasons or the birds or something, but okay. My favourite part is the snow."

"I already knew that," Shadow smirked.

Maria ignored his quip. She stretched and stood up straighter, trying to push away the fog that was encroaching on her mind. "That's not really true though. To be honest..." She rocked on her feet, suddenly feeling very light. "I think... I like... All of it."

"Knowing you, that's not really a surprise either," Shadow said, peering into the pot. Receiving no reply, he looked up. "Maria?"

She was gone.

In a panic, the hedgehog hopped to his feet and rushed through the open door. His heart jumped into his throat, seeing her crumpled in the snow, motionless.

"MARIA!" He skidded to a stop in the snow, flipping her onto her back. She was unconscious, but breathing, though this fact didn't reassure Shadow. With a grunt, he managed to pick the girl near twice his size up and maneuver her into the house, dropping her on the bed.

He stood still for a moment, at a loss for what to do. What if this was it? What if she never woke up?

A few minutes later, the girl did awaken from her lapse in consciousness, eyes opening slowly. But Shadow, crouched beside her, could see immediately that something was very wrong. Her skin was a more sickly pale than usual, her eyes a dull, hazy grey-blue, body shaking from even the smallest exertion.

"Sha... dow..." Her voice was small and hoarse, missing the usual bright tone and gentle lilt.

"Maria..." Now, even steady Shadow's voice was cracking. "It's okay. You're going to be okay."

He didn't believe it. Not right now, with Maria staring through him like that. But he said it anyway. Seeing his only friend fading away before him, it was all he could do.

Maria didn't get up anymore.

"Shadow?" Maria's small voice snapped him out of his trance. He, too, now spent his days doing nothing but staring into the fire pit.

The hedgehog crouched down next to her bed. Her waking up, much less speaking, was a rarity. It seemed she could barely find the strength to pull together more than a few words at once without stuttering or stopping. "Maria? What is it?"

She blinked, looking as if she was struggling to find the words. "Shadow... I need you to be... happy."

Shadow gave a small smile. "As long as you're happy, I'm happy."

The girl shook her head. "Don't have much time," she rasped. "You gotta... you gotta be happy. Happy without me."

Stricken, the hedgehog stared at her. "Maria... Don't say things like that. You're just..." His breath caught, and he had to swallow. "You're just going through a bad phase right now. Soon enough, you'll be up again, running around like usual, right?"

Maria stared at him wordlessly. Slowly, the girl reached out to take his hand, and Shadow realized that he was crying. But he didn't care, not anymore.

"I... I won't let you die, Maria! I won't let you!" he cried, swiping away his tears. "I won't let you."

Stupid, he thought. You're supposed to be the strong one.

"Shadow..." Maria began, and she turned on her back to stare at the ceiling. "Please remember why you brought me here. So I... I could be happy, right?" She turned her head to the side and smiled, holding back her tears. "I'm happy... Shadow. I promise."

Shadow clasped her hand in his, allowing a few more shameless tears to escape. *I won't let you die*, he repeated in his mind. *I won't let you die.*

They didn't visit Lina anymore. Sometimes, when Maria felt a little bit stronger, Shadow would bundle her up and they'd take a little walk, perhaps visit the great tree or just wander together. Sometimes she would have to be carried home after collapsing on the way back, and then she would be bedridden for weeks.

But sometimes they just enjoyed it, what little time together they had left. And, leaning on Shadow at the base of the tree or next to the icy river, Maria knew that if she had the chance to go back, she wouldn't have done a thing different.

Maria nearly tripped over the soldier. Shadow had to catch her by the jacket, hoisting her to her feet. They both peered down at the person who lay spread on the ground, a bruise on his forehead and a snapped tree branch nearby.

"G.U.N. is still sending out scouts," Shadow observed, eyes narrowing. "It looks like he was chasing after us."

"What are we going to do?" Maria asked.

Shadow shook his head. "He knows we're here. We can't just leave him." He glanced at Maria as red wisps of chaos began to crackle in his hands. "Go back there. Don't look."

Maria clenched her fists and grabbed Shadow's arm. Her eyes were fire and steel, the dull grey replaced with intense blue once more. Shadow was surprised, not having known if he would have seen that look on her face ever again.

"We don't..." she began, her face flushed, "we don't kill anyone. Not anymore."

"Maria..." At any other time, Shadow may have resisted her, putting her well-being before her desires as he had done when they were trapped in the basement. But now...

"Sometimes..." Maria crouched down next to the soldier, swiping his black hair out of his eyes, "kindness is enough."

When the soldier woke up, he felt unusually comfortable. Strange, since last he remembered, he'd been in a cold forest chasing after the fugitives. Feeling something warm in his hand, he closed his fingers around it.

"He's waking up." A soft voice like music drifted towards him.

"Maria! Get away from him!" This one was harsher, but still young, like a teenage boy's voice.

Maria ignored him, squeezing the soldier's large hand with her own tiny ones. His eyes opened blearily, and she saw that they were a dark blue, almost as black as his hair.

"Welcome back," Maria said softly, so as not to startle him.

The soldier automatically reached for his gun with his open hand but found that the holster was empty. He looked past the girl's faintly smiling face and saw a black hedgehog standing against the wall, gripping it tightly and watching him with hawk eyes. At that moment, he seemed less like a threat and more like a scared kid.

"The fugitives..." the soldier mumbled.

"Please... don't be afraid," said Maria. "We won't hurt you."

Nodding in delirium, the soldier slipped away again, back into the darkness.

The last thing he heard was a short, "Speak for yourself."

When the soldier woke up again, things were much the same. The hedgehog still sat in the corner, glaring, gun gripped tightly, and the

little girl sat on her knees beside him. But now, she was holding a plate of food. Or rations, more like.

"Please eat," she said. So, pulling himself up and keeping a wary eye on the black hedgehog, he did.

They sat in silence for a while after that, regarding each other inquisitively. Finally, after an uncomfortable amount of time, the soldier spoke.

"Please, forgive my rudeness," he said carefully, "but surely I must be dreaming." Shadow and Maria said nothing, so he continued. "This morning, I was under the impression that I was to find and execute a savage, mindless killer who had taken a sick little girl hostage, and perhaps even killed her by now. But now..." He tilted his head. "I see that this is not the case."

"Not a hostage," Maria said seriously. "Everything they've told you is a lie."

"Care to explain, little one?"

"I will," Shadow spoke up. "Gerald Robotnik created me both as a weapon for G.U.N. and in an attempt to save Maria's life. However, G.U.N. decided that I was out of control and came to put me down. Gerald allowed me to escape, hoping that I could lead Maria to safety, which I did. So G.U.N. responded by *massacring* every single person on the ARK. Most of them unarmed civilians."

The hedgehog pointed at the insignia on his shirt and growled. "I would have killed you if Maria hadn't stopped me, so you can thank her."

Maria would have put it a bit more gently, but she looked away, knowing it was true.

"I see," said the soldier. "Forgive me if I, uh... Have a hard time trusting you. Having worked for this company for most of my life, I..."

find it hard to believe that all my friends are murderers." Nervous, the soldier adjusted his jacket.

"They..." Maria took a breath and grimaced in frustration. It was difficult enough to talk as it was, but the extra stress added by the subject matter didn't help. "They were probably told the same lies."

The man nodded. "Even if I can't believe in what you say about the ARK... At the very least, it seems there's been a misunderstanding about the so-called mindless experiment and its hostage." He paused. "You understand that I can't betray G.U.N."

"You can just leave," Maria pleaded. "We won't hurt you. I'm... I'm not going to last long anyway. So just... go."

"And if you don't go peacefully, I'll kill you myself," Shadow added darkly. He hadn't taken his aim off him this whole time.

The soldier lay back down, gazing at the ceiling beams. "Truly then I have little choice. But what reason do you have to trust that I'll say nothing if I did leave?"

Maria looked back at Shadow, then turned towards the soldier. "Then we won't let you go."

The man looked at her and laughed incredulously. Held hostage by a little girl, it seemed. He stuck a big hand out. "Looks like I'll be sticking around for a while. I need to take it easy for a bit anyway. Name's Will."

Maria took it and chirped, "Maria!"

Shadow crossed his arms and mumbled, "Shadow." He wasn't going to get friendly with the murderer.

At first, Shadow refused to leave the house. But eventually the little sticks and branches they used as firewood ran out, and he was

forced to go, shoving a gun into Maria's hands and instructing her to sit against the wall until he came back.

Which is why he nearly facepalmed when he found the two of them cozying up on the floor, some sort of board laid out between them. Maria looked up innocently, with a chirp of, "Hi, Shadow!"

"Alright, kiddo, it's not so hard, right? You just move your pieces diagonally and try to jump the other colour. I can't believe you've never played checkers before."

"Why do you c-carry... games?" Maria stumbled excitedly over her words.

"It gets boring out on the trail," Will said. "Some soldiers like to bring cards or poker, but me, I prefer a nice game of checkers."

Shadow nearly groaned listening to the banter between them. They weren't supposed to be *friends*. He didn't even want to bring this guy back at all. But eventually, running out of things to busy himself with, he resumed his usual activity of leaning against the wall and glaring at Will.

"What?! You can jump them like that?! That's not... n-not fair!"

At least Maria is happy, Shadow thought. Realizing that his expression was softening, he pulled it back into a scowl.

Will was a joy to have around (at least for Maria), always telling jokes, making pleasant conversation, and playing games. Maria began to brighten up a bit, and even Shadow's opinion raised at seeing her happiness.

One day, though, he disappeared.

"Think he ran off?" Shadow asked bitterly.

"No!" Maria cried. "He just... just went for a walk."

They waited for a while, and the day wore on. But just as dusk came and they were beginning to lose hope, the man crashed right through the door, face obscured by piles of logs.

"Real firewood!" Maria squealed, jumping to her feet and nearly stumbling back down again.

Will set the logs down, then wiped his brow and exhaled heavily. "They gave me an axe in case I got lost in these woods, and seeing you two trying to keep warm with sticks, I just had to get enough wood to last the rest of winter. There's more outside."

The man stumbled back as Maria crashed into him. "Thank you, Will!" she exclaimed.

Will chuckled. "Don't sweat it, kiddo. I've already done that."

Even Shadow tossed his pride enough to say thank you. Now instead of spending all day trying to scrounge up enough to light a tiny fire, leaving Maria alone, they could stay warm. Like the guy or not, he was grateful.

That night, the three of them sat, bundled in blankets, next to a roaring fire.

Will stayed for a few weeks. He found ways to help out: Chopping a bit more firewood, teaching Shadow how to cook a proper meal, and keeping Maria cheerful with checkers and card games. Maria was reminded of Rei and the days they had spent together. And she was just glad to have a new friend.

But soon, the time came for him to depart. His squad would begin to get worried and send out search teams, putting them all in danger, for he would surely be executed as a traitor if they found him buddying up with fugitives.

So it was with a heavy heart that he announced his departure as of the next day.

"Don't go," Maria said, trying her best not to cry. "Won't see you again."

Will rubbed the back of his head. This kid really knew how to hit hard. "Sorry, kiddo, but if I stay they might find you. Shadow will be in custody and you'll be stuck in some hospital. Now that's no fun, is it?"

Maria shook her head, but she didn't care. "I know I shouldn't be... shouldn't be sad, but..." She smiled wanly. "You were... nice to us. Could have killed us, but you didn't."

"And I'm sure glad of that, kid." Will laughed and tapped his forehead, still faintly splotched with a bruise. "I'm happy that tree branch knocked some sense into me."

Maria giggled, but her face turned serious. She looked towards the open door, where Shadow sat on the steps, back to them. Leaning into Will, she whispered, "In a few weeks..." She gulped, knowing she was putting a name to the time she had left. "Please come visit Shadow. He..." She glanced at the hedgehog's back and sagged. "He'll need a friend. Promise?"

Will looked too and nodded. "Promise, kiddo."

He stuck out a large pinkie finger, and, laughing, Maria crossed it with hers.

When Maria slept, Will cautiously stepped outside, settling down next to Shadow. "Hey."

Shadow said nothing, continuing to stare straight ahead.

"Listen..." Will paused and looked through the door. The little girl was spread out on the bed, hair tossed wildly about, a peaceful look on her pallid face. "Is there anything... Anything I can do?"

Shadow's expression darkened and his face turned to the ground. He shook his head slowly.

He could ask for pills, but... He knew it wouldn't reverse the damage that the disease had already done to her body and mind. It would only prolong her suffering. Shadow clenched his hands into fists. After everything he had done, all the people he had hurt, he was out here, healthy, alive. While she, an innocent, kind being, lay sick and waiting for death.

"If, for any reason, you can't stay here..." Will looked up to the stars. "I live nearby. Akepo City. Here's my address." He handed the hedgehog a slip of paper. "I can take you both in if you need it. But Maria... Even if she had papers, I can't take her to the hospital."

Shadow shook his head. "She wouldn't want that. She wouldn't want to die in a place like that."

Will nodded. They were quiet for a while.

The soldier spoke up again. "My sister... She, uh... She was a little like Maria." He laughed shortly. "I don't know why I'm bringing this up. I don't have any good advice. What can you really say about it? What can you say that will fix something like this..."

Will paused and looked over at Shadow. He was trying to keep it under control, but the hedgehog was shaking. "I know you don't wanna hear it," he began carefully, "but you can't save her. I tried. I refused to believe it was happening, until..."

His brow furrowed. "You have to let that go. You have to understand that one day, you will move on. And you will be happy. Someday, the memory of her hopes and dreams will encourage you to keep going. Because, I can guarantee you..." He gazed upwards at the twinkling

lights that sparkled down from the heavens. "Her only dream now is for you to be happy after she's gone."

The next day, Will left. Maria never saw him again.

Maria was forlorn at Will's departure, but she at least tried to stay out of bed now. There were still days where she only slept, but she resisted so hard that sometimes even Shadow didn't want her up; he'd rather she rest than push herself.

Today she was feeling strong enough to get out of bed at least, even if she couldn't stand up very well. So it was another day of helping Shadow cook and playing with the cards and chess pieces Will had left as a gift, knowing he could simply buy more.

The evening was winding down as sunset encroached upon the world, and already Maria was feeling a bit tired, so she decided to rest before the fire a bit. Though Shadow tried to busy himself, something was bugging him.

"Maria..." he began, hesitating. "Did you ever notice how much you had changed? When I met you, you were always afraid. But after a while..." He trailed off.

The girl cracked her eyes open, but she didn't sit up. "Yeah... I did."

"What caused that?"

Maria stopped, biting her lip as she tried to gather the words from her slowing mind. "When I was a kid, I was always... scared. Too afraid to do anything. But after... After Rei..."

She shut her eyes tightly, gripping her head. In her mind were the visions of screaming and blood that had always haunted her. Shadow was about to rush over before a great calm suddenly settled over her.

Her eyes opened, weary. "After I saw how little I could do, I... I couldn't stand my helplessness."

Shadow looked away, guilt in his eyes. "I did that to you."

Maria nodded. "After that, I... vowed not to let anyone else die. No matter what. That's why I was able to kill the soldier. Even though - even though I always was too weak to do anything, I couldn't stand to let you die."

The girl looked up at the ceiling again, wistful. "It's a... silly dream. A world without pain or suffering... Without... without death or loss. I wanted to at least... at least help... one person." She trailed off then, expression hazy, but snapped back into herself after a moment. "Shadow... Have I helped you? Or have I only brought you more pain?"

Shadow, silent throughout her speech, started. "What? Of course not! I... I know now that I can't save you. But I'm happy that I was able to bring you here. That's all that matters."

Maria nodded, reaching a hand out, and Shadow happily took it, looping his arm around her back and helping her sit up. Weak, Maria rested against him for a moment. She spoke up again, quieter than before.

"Shadow... When I'm gone... Will you help me realize that dream?"

He held her tightly, afraid to let go. "I will, Maria. I promise."

The days slipped away. As soon as Shadow could catch them, they were only memories, gone again. He remembered little things. Sitting together by the fire, Maria leaning against him as he cooked dinner, the two walking together in the rare times where she found the strength, sitting on the steps and watching the clouds roll by.

The best memories were when they were able to get out of the house and just enjoy the quiet forest together. He remembered her falling into the snow, laughing, waving her arms back and forth wildly. Concerned, Shadow almost thought she was having a seizure, until he realized what she was doing.

With her rumpled clothing, golden hair intertwixt with snow and ice, and beaming face, she was a snow angel.

After awhile she went still, a dreamy look on her face, gazing up into the blue-grey sky. She thought of a poem she had read once, so very long ago, when her days were spent curled on the bed reading *Alice* .

In a Wonderland they lie, dreaming as the days go by, dreaming as the summers die.

She had reached Wonderland.

In another snatch of memory, on one of her weak days he carried her out to visit the great tree, something they had neglected for a long time. Settling down at the base, they listened to the wind whirling and pointed out little slivers of grass beginning to poke through the snow.

In the back of his mind, Shadow was relieved. Maria would at least to see the beginning of spring. He wouldn't have to remember winter, her favourite season, as the time that she left him.

But he tried to stop thinking about that, too. There was no point in letting himself be depressed in her final days. She wasn't gone yet, and he didn't want to bury her before she was dead.

After a while, Shadow was beginning to think that she was asleep. She leaned against his shoulder, eyes closed, breathing slowly.

Suddenly the girl spoke quietly, as if from a dream. "Shadow... Don't forget me?"

Shadow nearly laughed. What a silly request. Taking her hand, he spoke. "I'll never forget you, Maria. I promise."

She couldn't walk anymore. She stopped moving.

Not much changed in Shadow and Maria's world. Every day was the same now. Maria slept all day, and sometimes, when she could muster enough strength, she managed to talk a little bit. Sometimes she asked to go outside, and if it was warm enough, Shadow would carry her out. Sometimes in fits of deliria she asked for Lina or Will or even Rei. But mostly, she was silent in sleep.

And Shadow was forever afraid that one day he would shake her and she wouldn't be there anymore.

A pre-spring cold snap hit, and more snow fell from the sky, suffocating the grass that had just begun to grow. It looked much like the first day they had landed on Earth: a snowy expanse as far as the eye could see.

But now, with it as cold as it was, Shadow was too afraid to bring delicate Maria out into the freeze. So he did his best to turn away from her begging, as much as it pained him to see her relapse into unconsciousness again. But she could barely stay awake, much less move, so there was nothing he could do to encourage her.

That was why, one day, he was shocked to see her sitting straight up in bed. She looked as tired and dazed as usual, but he could see in her eyes that she was trying to pull together a few scraps of determination.

"I..." She trailed off, eyes hazy.

"Maria? Lay back down, you need to rest," Shadow gently chided, but he tried to guide her, she pushed him away.

Her expression cleared up a bit. She tried to muster the strength to speak. "Want to go... outside. I want... to run."

Shadow crossed his arms, trying to be stern though there was no strength in his voice. "Look at you. You can barely walk. We'll go outside when it's a little warmer, okay?"

Maria shook her head. "Wanna... wanna go outside."

"Spring is almost here." Shadow was getting desperate, knowing he couldn't fight her off for much longer. Not with that look on her face. "Can't you wait just a little more? Then, we can spend all day outside, if you want."

"We have to... Have to go now."

"Maria..."

The girl clenched her fists as hard as she could. "It's gotta be now." She relaxed and leaned back, tired from even that small exertion. "Please."

Shadow stared at her. He wondered how he would feel if, tomorrow, she didn't wake up, and he had denied her this tiniest of requests. So, getting out her winter clothes, he said, "Okay."

When she was bundled up, he picked her up with little struggle. The already-small girl had lost most of her weight. She was all bones now. And no matter how long she slept by the fire, her skin was always cold, like the winter she so loved.

"Where do you want to go?" Shadow asked, already knowing the answer.

"Great tree," Maria mumbled.

Nodding, the hedgehog set off, stepping carefully to not jar her. She was alert for once, eyes darting about the landscape, reaching out

for the trees towering above. She laughed softly whenever she saw squirrels and the returning birds peering down at her.

Soon enough, they reached it. The tree was waiting for them, and Maria felt as if she could hear it calling her. She tried to go hug it, but she remembered that she couldn't move her legs anymore.

"Here." Maria indicated the spot where they always sat together.
"Want to stay here."

Shadow obliged, setting her down gently and sitting beside her. He wanted to pretend that it was just like when they had first come here, and Maria still had months and months to live, but he stopped himself. *This is now*, he thought.

The world was quiet, holding its breath.

When it seemed like Maria was beginning to drift away, Shadow whispered, "Don't fall asleep yet." He pointed before them, to the trees, the sky, trying to keep her attention. "Don't even close your eyes."

"Tired," Maria mumbled after a while.

"C'mon, Maria," Shadow said cheerfully, though behind his words he masked a desperation. "If you fall asleep then you won't have any memories of this, will you?"

"Have a lot of memories," she said. "Memories with you. Happy. I'm happy..." She stopped talking, her point lost, but she didn't close her eyes.

Shadow found that he was beginning to tire as well, but he didn't want to lose a single second with Maria, so he resisted as hard as he could. Even when he found that tears were clouding his eyes, and all he wanted to do was forget, he refused to let sleep take this away from him.

"Aren't you afraid?" he whispered.

Maria blinked, remembering something, then smiled sleepily. "Not afraid. Never was afraid. Happy. I'll always be happy here..."

Shadow blinked the tears away. "Looks like you're braver than I am. But I always knew that."

They were quiet together for the longest time. But Maria was beginning to get tired again, so she leaned closer to Shadow and closed her eyes.

"Don't forget me," she breathed.

Shadow did laugh, this time. "Already said that I wouldn't." He looked at her peaceful face for a moment then turned his gaze to the sky. "Don't worry, Maria. I won't ever let your memory die."

Maria smiled gently, and closed her eyes, letting the darkness carry her away. "Thank you, Shadow."

When Shadow woke up, Maria was gone.

He buried her under the great tree, where they had spent all their time together, laughing and talking. Spring came and took away the snow and the hazy days, bringing a bright new horizon to Shadow's future. Flowers grew over her grave, little blue ones, like the colour she had always adored.

He wished that she could have had a chance to see flowers. But he knew she wouldn't like him thinking like that, so he tried his best to look ahead.

For a while he went to visit Will, and though he knew he could have stayed forever if he'd liked, he decided to move on. Become a wanderer, drifting through cities and towns. He didn't know how he

could help fulfill the promise he made to Maria, to help make the world a better place, even for just a single person, but it was a start. Perhaps on his journeys, he could find out.

Someday, he would be the one to bring hope to humanity, like she had always dreamed of. But for now, he just needed time.

In the meanwhile, he did his best to remember the words she had lived by. *Don't forget to be kind.* And he remembered his other promise, of never letting her memory die. He told the truth of the ARK, the story of Maria's life, to anybody who would listen. Soon, G.U.N. was forced to come out with the whole story, as people found more and more holes in their lies, and eventually it was disbanded and the people who had orchestrated the massacre jailed away forever.

So that was step one on making the world a little better, and too making sure people never ever forgot the ARK. Step two... Shadow wasn't sure yet. So he wandered.

Occasionally, perhaps every once a year or so, he came back to that place. Standing beneath the great tree, looking at the small, undisturbed rock that marked her final respite, he stared at the sky as they had together, so very long ago.

Sometimes he waited. For her to come back, perhaps, to pop out from behind the tree with a giggle. Or maybe for a sign, that she was watching.

Sometimes he thought about the traces of the past. The days they had spent together, on and off the ARK, in their innocent bliss. Wandering the forest, quiet. Her laughter, the flash of her hair in the sunlight. And all the way back, to that very first memory, when he opened his eyes and was awed to see that pinnacle of light standing before him, showing him compassion, brave, as she placed her hand on the glass.

And sometimes he sat there, quiet, not thinking of anything at all. But happy. Happy.

When he did look on the past, he did his best to remember her the way she would have wanted. Not as a too-naive child on the ARK. Not as a scared little girl, afraid of everything. Not even as someone who was so much braver than she had ever thought, who could do anything, anything at all, even tear down the walls that had kept them confined forever.

No. He would always remember her as a snow angel, daydreaming as snowflakes drifted to the ground around her, sitting high in the air with the final rays of sunlight catching in the strands of her hair, laughing as she ran with her arms spread wide, bits of snow caught in her hair and clothes, warm and compassionate and kind. Happy.

Shadow closed his eyes as the last moments of night began to fade away. He smiled as dawn peeked over the horizon, illuminating the grey sky and sending rays of light dancing through the trees. "Thank you, Maria," he said aloud, knowing that even if she wasn't here anymore, somehow, she would know.